

Never Be the Same by **MissAtomicBomb** (mrs_nerimon)

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Summary:

She dreams there's a kid in their basement and a monster in the hallway, a dead girl in the pool and something deep and dark and strong inside of her.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

How many versions of these idiots falling in love can I write? Apparently the limit does not exist. God save me.

The insomnia doesn't last long. Nancy almost expects it to persist, but after a little bit she can crawl into bed and be out like a light in a minute flat. It's like her body is making up for all the nights she lay awake, picturing every horror she'd seen over the past week.

But sleep brings its own problems; with sleeping comes dreaming.

She dreams she's floating underwater in Steve's pool, and when the ache in her lungs tells her go up she doesn't listen to it. She can't breathe but she doesn't panic, somehow. It feels right. It feels good. She closes her eyes and she can't hear the world, can't feel anything anymore.

She dreams of back-to-school shopping with Barb. They get cash for Christmas, fathers who don't know how to shop for teenage daughters, so they spend it on school supplies and a new outfit. The mall is empty but, as you do in dreams, they don't care. Barb picks out a dress for her, a soft pink, and they walk arm in arm along the shop windows.

She dreams of Steve's party, of a feeling of dread in her stomach that has nothing to do with the beer, nothing to do with the arm around her shoulder. The night plays out the same way, only the apprehension grows, and as Steve lays her down on the bed she can't stop the feeling that she's forgotten something horribly important.

She has good dreams of Steve too. The night they first talked, bon fire outside the school, his jacket around her shoulders. She dreams they go see *Footloose* together, and he hums the theme for the rest of the day.

Maybe that one happens. It's hard to tell, anymore.

She dreams she and Mike cook waffles until they're piled up to the ceiling, but the toaster is still dinging and Mike is still saying *more* and one of them is crying.

She dreams she kisses Jonathan on his couch, exaggerated alphabet letters floating above them like a child's picture book. His hand's tight in hers, their bandaging softening the grip. When it's over he whispers *it's definitely you*, and she wants to tell him that's her line.

She dreams there's a kid in their basement and a monster in the hallway, a dead girl in the pool and something deep and dark and strong inside of her.

School starts again in January, only it doesn't feel like it used to. She walks the familiar hallways alone, no one to meet her at her locker, no one to sit with on the bus. No one to call when her stomach churns before a big test, no one to listen to her presentations.

The rest of Hawkins High doesn't seem to notice the absence. Nancy wonders *what if it was me? What if I'd vanished without a trace? Would anyone bat an eye?*

Steve starts walking her to class. He saddles up beside her like a shield, slides his arm around her shoulders in a way that feels like he's guarding something.

"Wanna see a movie this weekend?" He asks before English, lingering just outside of Mr. Wyatt's class.

"Maybe. I have a lot of work."

That's her go-to excuse now; homework. Gotta study if she wants to get scholarships next fall. It's not all a lie, she's frequently found holed up in her room pouring over textbooks. The more time she

spends with her head over a book, the lesser chance she has of thinking about how she and Barb have eaten lunch together every day since fifth grade.

“Nancy,” Steve shifts the books in his hands. They’re just for show, he’s going to ditch fifth period History like he always does. “Just you and me. It’ll be fun.”

“Maybe.”

She leaves him with a shrug of her shoulders and a kiss on the cheek.

The weekend comes. Steve never calls.

She starts taking the car more. She tells her mother she wants to be more independent, and maybe that’s part of it. But it’s that driving is just the right balance between concentration and wandering, that her brain is preoccupied enough with the task that she can’t think too hard about what’s happened, but she doesn’t forget it, not for a second.

She plays her mother’s tapes, *Oldies Goldies* and The Eagles, Frankie Valli. Then Cyndi Lauper, because, of course.

There’s a tape in Jonathan’s room with her name on it. She knows because Mike told her that Will told him that he saw the tape and asked Jonathan about it. And Jonathan said *It was a present* and Will said *Well, why haven’t you given it to her?* and Jonathan said *It’s not that easy*, which is what adults say when they’re lying to themselves about something, according to Mike.

She thinks Jonathan got that from his mother. She thinks -no, she *knows*- that Will is the most important thing to both of them, the only thing that really matters. That he’s back but he’ll never really be safe in their eyes again. And that they haven’t got time for anything else right now.

Nancy hasn't got time for that now either. *That* being her clouded, possible-romantic-possible-nothing feelings for Jonathan.

There was a flash of a second, in the middle of it all, where she felt-*something*. Where she clung to him in the forest and watched him fall asleep beside her. Where they cut themselves open together.

But then he gets Will back and she gets *nothing*. A depressed little brother and a hole in her heart where her best friend ought to be. It's not fair. Nothing that happened that week was *fair*.

Steve's still there. Steve is still the teen dream, the first cool boy who ever looked her way, and *it's a great show of maturity to give someone a second chance*, her mother says.

Nancy puts on a new dress, pink like the one Barb bought her in a dream. Pairs it with thick tights to combat the chill outside. She smooths the wrinkles and watches it float around her pale calves, her knobby knees. Drifts downstairs feeling like she's almost still in that dreamworld, like she can cling to just enough of it to make it real.

Mike needs a ride to the Byers. They're working on their science project, and *they're totally going to kick ass this year* says Lucas.

She lets them both clamber into the backseat, slides in the Cyndi tape as she starts the car.

"Dustin can't make it but he says to use the calculations he made last time."

"He didn't even see the final part!"

"He's usually right about stuff like this-"

Nancy turns up *All Through the Night*. The boys are drowned out in the backseat, momentarily.

“We’re having lunch first.” Mike leans forward over the console. “You should stay.”

She makes the turn onto their street.

“What?”

“At Will’s. Jonathan always makes lunch.”

Nancy swallows. “It’s 2:30.”

“Will sleeps late.” Mike’s voice creeps an octave higher. “But I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you stayed.”

She hears the sound of skin on skin; Lucas knocking his friend on the arm. Nancy pulls into the Byers driveway without another word, turns off the car.

“Have fun.” She says half-heartedly out the window.

They scamper up the concrete path, throw open the door without knocking. It’s so childish it makes her smile, until she remembers what it was to be so close with someone you never had to announce yourself.

A figure comes to the door to shut it. She sees a hand close around the edge, and then pause.

Jonathan pops his head out, looking unsurprised to see her there.

“Hey.”

She doesn’t quite hear it over the distance, but she sees his mouth move, watches him shuffle outside onto the porch.

“Hey.”

He’s got something spilled on his shirt, and his hair’s sticking up in the back. She’d guess Will’s not the only one who sleeps late.

If she could, she’d put money on Will and Jonathan attempting sleep for hours at night, failing, finding each other, and then finally

succumbing in the early hours of the morning.

Maybe she's projecting.

"You hungry?" He tugs at the bottom of his shirt.

Yes. Well, no- She's rarely hungry these days. She eats because she has to. Because otherwise she'll feel even worse.

But all she says to Jonathan is *sure*. She's confident this is Mike's doing, that as soon as he got in the house he bemoaned *Poor Nancy, all alone on a Saturday, she'd totally want to hang out with you.*

Jonathan smiles.

It's peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Of course it is, it's food for 12 year old boys.

Jonathan has a sheepish look on his face, like he's embarrassed about something. About everything.

It's night and day from when she last saw their house. The walls are whole, the lights are gone. The painted alphabet has been wallpapered over. The hallway smells of soap and something fruity, not gasoline and burnt carpet.

The boys set up in the living room. She lingers in the kitchen with Jonathan, propped up against the sink, taking the smallest bites she can manage.

"Is it bad?" He asks, like he could possibly mess up peanut butter and jelly.

"It's great."

There's a crash in the living room. Jonathan goes in and drops the *Mom won't clean that up*, and Will, embarrassed, mumbles a response that Nancy can't hear.

For a brief moment she considers slipping out while he's distracted. She shouldn't have said yes, shouldn't have agreed to this, shouldn't have come over here at all.

She and Jonathan really haven't spoken since it all happened. A few awkward waves across the cafeteria, one brief brush in the hallway. And then there's Christmas Eve, but that's nothing.

At least, that's what she told Mike when he clambered into her bed and went *Will said you kissed him* and she explained how you could kiss your friends, and anyway it was just the cheek and that was okay, only she and Jonathan weren't even really friends, so maybe it wasn't okay.

Jonathan comes back into the kitchen, and she's already half coming up with an excuse to leave when he reaches for her hand.

"You have-" He aborts the motion, swinging his arm back to his side in a comical circle. "Jelly."

"What?"

Jonathan holds up his own thumb in demonstration, and Nancy glances down. There's a purple smear along her thumbnail, and she licks it off in an automatic action.

"On your arm, too." He points again, his mouth beginning to curve upwards.

Nancy wipes it away with her free hand, goes to wash in the sink. She can feel his eyes on her back, right until she turns back around and he glances down.

One of the boys shouts a curse in the living room.

"How are you?" She asks, even though it's a ridiculous question.

"Good." Jonathan lies, and she lets it be. "You?"

"Good."

They stand in silence for a minute, ignoring the weight of all the

unasked questions, before she offers something about an essay due on Monday, and sneaks out the front door.

Steve's in the living room when she gets back. He's chatting with her dad and building Lego's with Holly; it's almost scary, how well he seems to fit.

"Hey, Nance." He rises to his feet, leaves her sister with a half-built doll's house. They retreat to her bedroom, and her father doesn't even bat an eye.

When she shuts the door but doesn't lock it, Steve looks at her.

"What's up?"

"You forget something?" He says it like a joke, lips curling up, but his eyes are flat.

"Sorry?"

"Saturday." He steps forward, takes her hands. "I thought we were going out."

Oh. *Oh*.

He'd asked about it weeks ago. They were supposed to go out in the county and have a picnic, something cliché and romantic and-

She did forget.

"I'm so sorry."

Steve doesn't really look upset about it. More confused than anything else.

"Is everything alright?" He rubs at her arms, but the gesture doesn't feel as comforting as she knows he intends it to be. "You're a bit... Spacey."

That's one way to put it.

"I just have a lot on my plate right now."

He smiles. Leans forward and kisses her forehead, like she's a little kid.

"It's okay. I'm just worried about you."

Don't be.

Nobody says anything, but they're not exactly dating, anymore.

They haven't had sex in- one month? Two months? The last time they tried she got as far as taking off his shirt before that feeling coiled in her gut, fear and worry piling on like his mouth sliding down her neck.

Steve's really good about it. Better than she would have expected. Not that she thought he wouldn't respect her, but-

She's his girlfriend. She's supposed to want these things. Or at least some version of these things.

But all she wants is to be alone, to lock herself in her room and pour over old scrapbooks. To eat dinner silently with her brother and then return to the pink splashed walls she painted as a ten year old, the stupid Tom Cruise poster and the stuffed animals she knows she's too old for.

Steve, with his pastel shirts and perfect hair, fits in her room the same way he fits with her family. He's handsome and charming and he's *safe*.

That's the word. Safe. Steve will never bring up what occurred during that week. He'll admit to his mistakes but he'll never push her for what really went down, with Jonathan, with the monster, with it all.

He's the choice Nancy of Before would have made. He's the bad boy with a heart of gold, the one who ditched his douchebag friends and tried, *tried* to be better for her.

It's not a choice, her brain reminds her. It's two real people. It's your life, Nancy, so don't screw it up.

The snows outside slow and Mike begins to emerge from the basement more often. The fort's still down there, left assembled like a museum exhibit. Sometimes she can hear him talking to someone who isn't there.

She never faults him. She does it too, when the darkness in her room feels suffocating. She picks up the phone and imagines there's someone on the other line, like she's nine years old. Playing pretend.

For a week or maybe longer, Mike would crawl into her bed and they'd both lay there in silence. It was easier, with another person. Then one night he just stopped, and Nancy never questioned it. Maybe they both needed to grow up. Maybe they both needed something else.

Now he's got color in his face again, and he laughs when Holly throws her peas and he no longer makes their mom buy Eggos on every grocery trip.

But there's still a light that's gone out behind his eyes, and Nancy doesn't know if it'll ever come back again.

The science fair comes. Mike and the boys place second, which grates all of them except Will.

Nancy wears that same pink dress and stands in-between her parents, clapping for all of them as they accept the trophy. Mr. Clarke gives a

speech about fairness and the reward of hard-work to an uninterested audience. The boys try not to look too disappointed. Nancy tries to pretend she can't feel Jonathan's eyes on her from where he stands with his mother.

She hears the click of a shutter. For a second her heart speeds up, until she reminds herself that he wouldn't, not now, not after-

She looks over at him. The camera's pointed square at the stage, at the gang putting on their best forced smiles.

Nancy turns back. She doesn't catch him looking at her for the rest of the afternoon, even when she's sure he can sense her gaze.

She gets a copy of the photo. It's slipped into her locker, laying atop her French book as she opens the metal door before Homeroom one morning.

Jonathan's captured a moment different from the one she saw. It's not four boys dejected after coming in runner-ups; it's a group of friends, sharing a knowing look in the adorably coy way that only preteens have.

It's Mike, a spark of something in his smile. Maybe not what used to be there, but something. It's Dustin and Lucas, pressed tight together in the middle, elbows driving into each other's ribs as they vie for the best position. It's Will, his tiny hands clutching the handles of the trophy, face just peeking out over the top, huge smile and bright eyes, not a hint of the boy who spent two weeks in the hospital.

It's *hopeful*, Nancy thinks.

2. Chapter 2

There's an abnormally warm day in March, where she takes her bike out from the depths of the garage and goes for a ride with Mike. They don't talk much, just pass by the uniform houses and out along the main road. They reach the town limits, the *Welcome to Hawkins* sign partially covered with dirt from the road.

There aren't any cars passing by. Sunday afternoon, everyone's at home. She watches the endless stretch of the highway. When she was little, she used to have to remind herself that there was a world outside of Hawkins. It seemed so foreign; big cities and quick-paced life.

Now she knows there's a whole other life *inside* of Hawkins, terrible things happening right under her nose. Another world of darkness that operates just like this one, only deadlier.

"Wow." Her brother drops his feet to the gravel, lets out a deep exhale.

"Wow." Nancy echoes, although maybe they're championing different things.

Mike tightens his grip on the handles until his knuckles go white. For a brief second, she thinks he's going to go for it.

Then thunder bellows above them, and Mike circles around and heads back down the highway.

They get back just before dinner. She slips her bike back into its waiting place, the torn pink tassels hanging off the handles, devoid of all shine they held when she unwrapped it as a ten year old.

"Are you tired?" Mike asks as they move back into the basement. "I sleep better when I'm tired."

Nancy nods in agreement. She's pausing at the bottom of the steps, waiting as he shuts the door, when her eye catches something. Or rather, doesn't.

There's an empty space across from her. No blankets laid out in pristine condition, no chairs to string bedsheets over. The radio is set on the table, facing upwards at the ceiling, a corpse in a coffin.

Mike's not noticed yet. She could still sweep him upstairs, leave it for another day.

But it's like she's stuck there, watching him turn around and recognize the absence for himself.

His brow drops and he seems about to shout, or maybe cry, before he spins and bolts up the steps.

"How could you?"

When she peeks into the kitchen he's looking between both of their parents accusingly, all of the hurt of the last few months erupting at once.

"Michael-" Their dad tries to placate the situation but Mike's too far gone for that be helpful.

"You said, you said I could keep it-"

"Mike," Their mother reaches for him, pulling him into a hug even as he tries his best to get out of it. "It'll be alright."

She feels like a traitor watching the scene, like she was somehow complicit in all of this.

Mike tears away and escapes upstairs. The kitchen descends into silence, all three of them frozen in space for a long moment.

Nancy catches her mother's eye as she turns away.

She doesn't agree with them. She doesn't *not* agree with them either.

It's no good to hold onto grief, to cling to a person who's not coming

back. She could tell Mike that clear enough.

But it's not like she's got a better way of dealing with it.

"I framed the picture."

Jonathan looks up like he's in trouble, eyes wide, expressionless.

"In the living room." Nancy hugs her books to her chest and leans against the row of lockers. "Mom loves it."

'Oh," He's frozen with one arm in his locker, the other clutching his open bag. "That's good."

She's not sure if there's anything else she's meant to say, but she doesn't want to drift off just yet.

Jonathan pulls out a book, shoves it into the bag. There's a bandage wrapped around his left palm and she clenches her own reflexively.

"Does it still hurt?" She asks.

He glances down at his hand.

"No, I, um- I was making dinner last night. I just-" He presses his lips together. "Slipped."

She can see the edge of the scar poking out the bottom of the wrapping, bumpy and pink. Her own is slim, light as a pencil tip. She took care to sterilize it every night until the mark was nearly gone, as if that would help with anything at all.

Jonathan seems to not have undergone the same procedure.

Overtime, the skin will regrow and there will be nothing left. Nothing else concrete to remind them of that week. The fort is gone, Will's grave is gone, the Christmas lights are gone. They're so, so close to being back to Before.

Nancy's not sure if she wants that back. If she wants to move on in a world that denies the most important week of her life.

"I'm sorry." She curls her fingers around the hard edges of the textbooks.

The bell rings. Jonathan fumbles with his bag, slams the locker door. It looks as if he's going to say something else, until someone stumbles into him from behind and he brushes past her without a word.

She notices him more. It doesn't seem deliberate, but it's like all of a sudden he's become a real player in her life, even if he's still trying desperately to cling to the sidelines.

Jonathan's in her peripheral constantly; three spaces behind her in the cafeteria, parking his car just next to hers, leaving History the same time she leaves Chemistry so they lock eyes for the briefest of moments.

He swings by for Mike (and, by extension, Lucas and Dustin if they can get over in time) before school. He honks once, twice, and she can hear Mike trampling down the stairs, tripping over his own feet to get out the door.

"Nancy!" Her mother calls from the bottom of the steps, and she can hear the shouts of the kids outside. "Do you want a ride to school?"

She cracks her bedroom door.

"I'll take the car!" She yells back. There's four boys and five seats in Jonathan's car, and besides, he's never really *offered* before.

"I need it for Holly's classes later, sweetie." Her mom ascends the stairs and her voice vibrates off the ceilings, slipping into Nancy's bedroom. "I don't want you to be late."

Jonathan honks the horn again. Or maybe it's Will- this one's longer than the others. Nancy can hear Mike scrambling to find all his books

downstairs.

“Nancy, I mentioned this last night-“

“I thought you said-“

“Why don’t you ask Jonathan for a ride?” They’ve met out in the hall, Nancy with her book bag swinging off her shoulder, her mother propping a folded stack of clothes against her hip. “I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Mike wrenches the door open to a loud creak. She can hear his footsteps as he rushes out to the car.

Dammit. She’d walk if she wasn’t certain Mrs. Tucker, the homeroom teacher, would give her a demerit for being late. And if she’s not the girl with a 4.0 and that perfect attendance record, then who exactly is she?

Her shoes sound even louder than her brother’s as she makes it down the stairs in a frantic motion, fingers holding tight to the strap of her bag. Through the screen door she can see the car pulling just out of the driveway. She stumbles out the door, book bag flopping against her leg, and Jonathan slows to a still again.

“Hey,” There are five faces looking at her with confusion, and she tries not to think what a mess she must look. “Can I- Could I have a ride too?”

Jonathan looks to the side, then snaps back to her and nods. He takes a quick glance around the car, taking stock of all the filled seats.

“Get in the back.” He says to his brother, and Will rolls his eyes.

“Come *on*.”

“Get in the back.” Jonathan repeats with the utmost sincerity.

Will grumbles to himself as he slides out the front seat, leaving the door open and sending her a pitiful look over his shoulder.

It's eerily silent the whole ride to school. She and Jonathan pointedly don't look at each other, and the boys don't speak in the back, Will crammed in half on his friends' laps.

The radio is off, though she can spot a collection of discarded cassette tapes by her feet. In the stillness she can nearly hear Dustin's nasally breathing in the backseat.

The foursome stumbles out of the car directly in front of the *Hawkins Middle* sign, Will mumbling a *thank you* to his brother and the other boys scrambling up the hill.

Jonathan still doesn't say anything as he turns around, starts up the road again. The quiet isn't uncomfortable, but it's odd. Because it was so easy to talk to him *then*, but now it's like they're always on guard, both protecting careful secrets from each other.

It seems unlikely he's going to take the jump, so she goes for it first.

"How's Will doing?"

"Good." Jonathan rubs a hand across his face, and she notices the bags under his eyes, the darkness in his features. "Mostly- Mostly good."

They fall back into silence again. She can see the roof of the school as he nears the parking lot, appearing out of the fog like a horror movie poster.

Jonathan clears his throat, cutting into her image of a bloody title sequence stamped over their high school.

"Thank you." He glances over, then right back to the road as soon as she meets his gaze. "For the camera."

He'd already thanked her for it, the first day back at school. That might have been the last real conversation they had. And then, she'd thought, with the photo of Mike and the others-

"You're welcome." She still offers.

“It’s been great.”

Nancy can see the beginning of a smile, and she wishes he’d turn to face her so she could see the glint in his eyes too.

“It’s better than my old one, really. Thank you.”

She thinks of saying *Steve picked it out*, but Steve doesn’t seem to quite fit in this conversation.

“I’m sorry Will had to move.” She says instead, and she sees him frown.

“What?”

“Just- I was actually going to take the car, but Mom needed it and I would walk, but I can’t get a late slip, and- and you made him go in the back, he just seemed-“

“Don’t worry about it.” Jonathan saves her rambling, soft voice echoing in the car. “And Will’s not really mad, he’s just kidding.”

“*Thank you* is what I’m trying to say.” She’s not sure if this attempt at conversation is more or less awkward than the forced silence of earlier.

He nods, making the turn into the parking lot.

Nancy turns her attention back out the window as he pulls into a spot. He turns off the car and suddenly even the background noise is gone.

She’s not sure how to leave him like this. She doesn’t want to give into what’s already happened, the distance that they’ve already pushed between them. But a *hey, want to come over after school today* is too much, and it’s like she can’t find the in-between.

“Next time,” Jonathan pockets the keys, looks over at her with something close to a smile. “I’ll make you sit in the back.”

Nancy keeps the gun. She probably shouldn't have, but it rests, unloaded, on a shoebox in her closet.

Sometimes she takes it out and sees if it still feels at home in her palm. It always does, and it brings up that same surge of adrenaline, the heat that runs up her arms.

When it feels like there's a gap in her life, a piece ripped straight out, she tries to see if the gun fills it. It doesn't, not quite, but it always makes her feel better. Stronger. Braver.

After school one day she pulls it out, wraps her fingers around the grip. She's not crazy enough to take the safety off in the house, or even to point it at anything, but she glances in the mirror, and the girl who looks back is unfamiliar.

She's worn this outfit a dozen times, colorful skirt and light blue top. She likes it, it's bright enough to stand out but not so much it's an eyesore.

But the barrel of the gun is brushing against the skirt, and suddenly she feels like a kid playing at being an adult.

She's no longer the girl in the pictures on her wall. She's no longer the girl who shot at a monster.

Who else is there to be?

Her GPA has never been better, she's on track to graduate with honors, and Mrs. Tucker suggests that she take some classes at the local college next year to get some prerequisites out of the way.

It should feel *good*. An accomplishment. She could get into Ivy Leagues, even Columbia takes women now.

But it's like suddenly, she's not sure if that's all she wants. To go to a

good college, get a good job, and-

Start a good family, right? That's what comes next.

She meant what she said to Jonathan, that she won't be her mother, or worse, her father. But he was right too; that's what all teenagers think, until they get too far down the path to retreat.

She dreams about biking with Mike again. They get to the woods and he keeps going, pedaling through the branches as darkness falls. She can't keep up, getting lost among the trees. It's the dead of night and she's alone, but there's no fear creeping up her spine.

She can see it just in front of her, the glowing tree and its otherworldly portal. She passes it, over and over, until she realizes she's going in a circle, and Mike is nowhere to be found, and no matter how hard she tries to get away she's pulled right back here.

"It's good to be back to normal, right?"

Steve dips fries in his milkshake as he tentatively drops the question, testing the waters. It's like he's not sure what version of her he'll get today. There's Nancy who plays along, says she can't wait for the Spring Fling and hopes it'll get warmer next weekend for the game. Then there's Nancy who pushes back, who tells him she's doing target practice in the woods and researching monster legends at the library.

Most of the time she operates somewhere in the middle of the two.

She wonders what makes him think *that* today. Is it because this is the third date in a row she hasn't cancelled on? Because she reached for his hand last night at the movie?

"What do you think is normal?" The question slips out, her voice soft

against the background chatter of the diner.

She's not trying to put him off, it's a genuine wonder. *Is normal them? Is it sleeping without nightmares? Is it getting through the day without panic rising, at least once, hard and fast in her throat?*

"You know," Steve shakes his head, hunches down over the linoleum table. "Just regular stuff. Like, going out, and school. I don't know, Nance, you were just—"

Here it is.

"Distant. For a while."

He's not wrong. But nothing's changed. She doesn't feel any better than she did two weeks ago, any more together.

She doesn't have a response. Steve looks down at his food and bites at his lip in an uncharacteristic gesture.

"Nevermind." He mumbles, and they pass the rest of the meal in silence.

Monday comes, and she feels a surge of bravery. Boldness.

She seeks out Jonathan at school. They both have sixth period study hall, but juniors and seniors are allowed to use it as a free period, and she's fairly certain where he'll be.

The darkroom's on the third level of the school, tucked away with other art class rooms and a space that she thinks is used for band practice.

There's no one else in the room, but he doesn't look up when she lets the door swing shut behind her.

He's bent over one of the machines, fiddling with a knob. She's used a Polaroid and the family's camera, but all of this is lost on her.

Jonathan straightens up again, searching for something in his bag, and she's trying to think of a way to announce her presence when he glances over his shoulder.

"Nancy." He never looks surprised to see her. She could probably show up at his house one night and he'd give her the same look, let her in without comment.

"What are you doing?"

It's pretty obvious what he's doing, but that's kind of their thing now. Asking useless questions.

Jonathan tilts his head towards the bins, and she crosses the room to stand beside him. The one drifting in the liquid is of the forest she knows too well, tree tops stretching towards a clear sky.

She wonders how often he goes back there.

"It's boring." He says, and he brings up a hand to rub at his mouth. "But people like nature, right?"

Nancy smiles, just to herself.

"Yeah."

"I figured, next to this, the pictures of monsters will look even cooler."

She still has the photo of Barb in her nightstand. Briefly, she considers if he would want it back.

"What's it for?" She asks, dropping her voice down to a level that feels more appropriate for a conversation in a dimly lit room.

Jonathan shuffles his feet, leaning onto the counter.

"I don't know. I just thought, for schools or," He shrugs, pushing a hand through his hair. It sticks out at angles, growing away from his face like the branches in the woods. "Just to have, I guess."

"Do you have anything better than that?" Nancy teases, pointing a

finger at the image darkening before them.

He glances up with a hurt expression and she smiles.

“I’m kidding.”

“I do, though.” It’s not pride in his voice, but maybe it’s in the ballpark. “Uh, at home, mostly. Some nice ones of Will. And at the science fair, I like those.”

She wants to ask to see them, the ones of the boys especially, only that would mean going to his house, and she’s promised Mike she’ll drive him home today.

Another question pops into her head, and she can’t stop herself from asking it.

“What do you dream about?”

She sees the furrow in his brow, the confusion. He opens his mouth and then shuts it again, self-consciousness written all over his face. As he reaches to pull the photograph out, Nancy attempts to backtrack.

“I’m sorry, that’s very... You don’t have to answer. I won’t-“

“Will.” The picture’s dripping from between his fingers but Jonathan’s frozen, staring down at it with intent in his eyes. “I see him all the time. It’s him but it’s not, like that thing has taken over him, or- I don’t know.”

Nancy bites the inside of her lip.

He hangs the picture, slow and steady movements.

“And the monster, too, just... Less so.”

“Demogorgan.” She chimes in, the name the kids gave it.

It’s weird, how *that* wasn’t the lasting image from the whole week. It’s not a faceless creature that she fears anymore. There are much worse things, it turns out.

He looks pained. It's the red light, casting shadows across his face. She's about to say something else, offer an apology that's not going to fix anything, but she stops herself.

She *wants* to fix things. She wants, with all of her being, to be his friend again. Or something else, maybe.

She wants to ask if he has good dreams too, if maybe she's a part of them.

Jonathan's watch beeps.

"I should," He rolls down his sleeves, shakes his head so his hair falls flat again. "I have to go."

There's an overwhelming desire to reach out and touch him, but she doesn't know where it comes from and it would be treacherous to listen to it.

"Okay."

He picks up his bag and slings it over his shoulder, locks his gaze with her.

"I'll see you later?"

There's another question in there, and the answer to both is yes.

Nancy nods. He leaves, quietly, door falling shut behind him.

The image of the trees drips above her on the line.

Notes for the Chapter:

For the record, gun safety is very important and please don't keep your pistols in your bedroom, pals. Even if you're planning on fighting monsters with them.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Why did this get so long? Why do I love these dumb kids so much? Please help me.

Rating was upped exclusively for swearing, which def isn't a big deal but I'm mostly paranoid.

She dreams about a little girl with blood on her mouth, in a torn pink dress and short hair.

The girl sits in the basement, in the empty space where her fort used to be, and looks up, up, seeing beyond the roof of their house and into somewhere else entirely.

Nancy watches her; maybe from the basement too, or maybe from another side. Right side. Downside. Their side.

The girl looks back. Looks through her. Into her. She smiles, a weak little smile, a kid who doesn't know how to do it quite right.

Nancy smiles back, and the basement fades away until it's just the two of them, and then it's just blackness.

There's a knock on her bedroom door.

"Do you wanna watch with us?" Mike hovers in her doorway, bowl of popcorn in his hands.

"Hm?"

"*Star Wars*. Do you want to watch?"

She's never been invited before. The basement is sacred ground, and she knows better than to trespass when everyone's down there.

Mike's looking at her intently, but she's not sure which answer he's expecting.

"I'm busy." Nancy slides her textbook closed, pretending like she wasn't studying French on a Friday night.

"Is Steve coming over?" Mike hasn't asked about Steve in a long time, but she supposes he assumes that's the only thing that could preoccupy her time.

"No." She considers expanding, but she's not sure what she would say. *No, we aren't really talking at the moment, but I think we're still dating. 90% confident.*

"Did you guys break up?" He says it softer than the other questions, almost afraid to scare her off with the answer.

"No."

Mike lingers for a second longer, before he gives a little nod and turns around.

"You can join us later!" He calls from down the hall, and she can't help the smile that tugs across her face.

She and Steve return to the diner, order the same food, and eat the same quiet meal. She doesn't mind the silence, really. But she's also sure that if he could, he'd make it different.

The bell above the door dings. Steve looks up and makes a face, sliding down in the seat.

"What?" Nancy realizes it's the only third thing she's said to him since they got here, right after *Where do you want to sit* and *This is good, isn't it?*

"Nothing-"

But she peers over her shoulder to meet the grinning face of Tommy *goddamn* H and Carol.

For the most part, she's been able to avoid them. Steve's usually enough to ward off comments at school, but they must be feeling pretty good about themselves today, because they make a beeline straight for the table.

"Hey, Stevie." Tommy claps him on the back in an exaggerated action. His face is nearly split open in a forced smile, like a mockery of genuine happiness. "*Nance*."

She's caught between ignoring them outright and giving into the urge to smack the look off of both of their faces.

"How's it *going*, you guys?"

No response. Steve clenches his jaw and keeps looking down at the table. She wishes he'd say something, but she can feel the words caught in her own throat too.

"Saw you and the creep are back at it," Carol leans over and pops a bubble dangerously close to Nancy's face. "Can't say I'm really surprised."

"Yeah, little miss perfect sneaking out of study hall to get it, huh?"

She can hear the blood rushing in her ears, drowning out his next comment. The thought of them spying on her; *God*, who even does that? Who *cares*?

"Like, is it too dark to see anything in there? 'Cause if I had to, I'd probably wanna do him like that too." Carol's laugh is tinny and fake, and Nancy can nearly hear it knock around inside of her head.

Steve looks up sharply, the first moment he's acknowledged them.

"*Fuck off*." He says, in a voice too solid and deep to really be him for a second.

Nancy watches the grin flicker on Tommy's face, before he slips an arm around his girlfriend and they slide away.

When she turns back to Steve he's swirling the straw of his shake, looking like he's thinking hard about something. There's a feeling building inside, but it's too close to an apology. She doesn't need to give one, and she's goddamn sick of saying those two words anyway.

She offers a muted *thanks* instead.

Steve still doesn't look back at her.

"Assholes." He mumbles, only it's mostly to himself.

Something tugs at the corner of his mouth. Nancy wishes she didn't know exactly what it was.

The second floor girls bathroom stall still reads *Nancy Wheeler is a cheating slut* in pink marker. She brings in stain remover to clean it one day during lunch, but she can't quite make herself do it.

She knows it's false. Knows it doesn't really matter anyway, because *slut* is a useless word. Steve's slept with other girls before, the whole school knows, but nobody would write anything about him. Nobody would call him a whore when her back was turned.

And she *didn't*, even.

But she still stands there and stares at the writing until it's burned into her head, stacked under the movie marquee, until the door swings open with a bang and she goes to class.

For their mother's birthday she and Mike both resolve to make dinner for her, let her spend the evening resting.

But Mike burns the mac and cheese and Nancy doesn't use the right pan so the cake is lopsided, frosting dripping off onto the plate and

all over the kitchen.

"Well," Mike says as they observe their joint efforts, a mess of dirty dishes in the sink and pink frosting smeared across his cheek. "Dammit."

Mom still kisses their heads and tells them how nice it all is. How much she appreciates the effort, even as she can't finish the food.

Nancy wonders what that says about them, about *her*, that she goes to bed and dreams about fighting monsters and saving a life that shouldn't have disappeared, but she can't even cook dinner right.

Intermediate Social Studies is laying in the middle of Jonathan's back seat, sandwiched in between an abandoned jacket and a big cardboard box with a handful of records spilling out the top. There's a food wrapper crushed underneath it, although Nancy would likely attribute that to one of the boys.

Still, she's almost surprised. She would have thought that with Jonathan, everything had a place. He seems the kind to alphabetize those records and make his bed in the morning.

She's peering in through the window when footsteps sound behind her. When she spins around he's stopped a few feet away, one hand holding his keys and the other wrapped tight around the strap of his bag.

Jonathan glances between her and the car with his eyebrows knit together, like he's trying to piece together some big mystery.

"Do you need a ride?" He asks, and the keys in his hand jingle as he shifts back and forth.

"No, I wanted-" A breeze rolls across the parking lot, forcing her hair into her face, and she cuts herself off.

I wanted to see you. I wanted to say I'm sorry we drifted apart, and you

were a good monster hunting partner, and I admire you and I miss-

"Mike left his book in your backseat."

Jonathan raises his eyebrows.

"I was just checking, I thought, maybe he forgot it somewhere else." She wipes her hands on her jeans; it's not even that *warm* out, they shouldn't be this sweaty. "I wasn't going to break in or anything."

The ghost of a smile appears on his face.

"Right."

Another breeze sends her hair into her eyes again, and in the time it takes to tame it Jonathan begins to unlock the car.

Nancy steps aside to let him in the backseat, and he emerges holding the book and the jacket.

"Is this his too?" He holds it out for inspection.

It's small, now that she's seeing it up close. Stripes across the middle and solid green sleeves; she's certain she's seen it before, but not on Mike.

Nancy shakes her head.

He concedes with a shrug, and the jacket lands silently back on the seat.

"They keep leaving crap in here." He frowns, but it's not genuine. "I'm gonna stop taking them places."

"No, you aren't." There's a grin building across her face, tight in her cheeks.

Jonathan looks right at her, squinting in the sun, and nods, just once.

"No, I'm not." He's smiling back but it's tight-lipped, not the way she knows he can, not the way she's seen it before.

In an instant he seems to remember the book in his hands,

straightening up and holding it out to her.

She takes it, fingernails digging into the hard cover.

“Thanks.”

He tosses the keys in his hand again, metal clinking.

Nancy holds the book against her leg and tries to think of a way to prolong this interaction. There's *Can I have a ride home* but that only gets them as far as her house, and she can't bring him in because everyone, Mike and Mom and maybe even her dad, would think *something* was up and she wouldn't hear the end of it for a week, and that's so much, too much to deal with right now.

She's so caught up in the effort she nearly misses his question.

“Do you want to come over?”

“What?”

Jonathan looks like his brain is very much sending him some mixed signals in regards to this conversation, but he pushes through.

“Do you want- If you're not busy, we could... Or, we- You're probably busy.” He tightens his grip on his bag, and Nancy wants to save him.

“Okay.” She says, and his eyes get a little wider.

“O-Okay, you're busy?”

“Okay, I want to come over.” She sounds way more confident than she feels, stomach churning with the concept of being there with him.

Not like that, her brain barks immediately, the constant reminder, *keep yourself in check, Wheeler. Like friends.*

She wants a friend. He wants a friend. They can do this.

Jonathan loosens his grip.

“Okay.” He repeats, and this smile starts on the right side and then

curves across, until it looks like the one she imagines sometimes when she can't sleep.

Jonathan prefaces entering his house with *We haven't cleaned much* and *It really not great* but she couldn't care less, standing here on his porch. The same one where they sat out the aftermath of a monster killing, silent save for Steve still mumbling *what the fuck* every now and then.

There's a handful of papers littering the coffee table in the living room. Drawings, she realizes as she gets closer. She knows some of them, fantasy characters she's heard enough from Mike to recognize. Real ones too; that little girl in a jacket that's too big for her, Dustin and Lucas on their bikes, a boy holding a camera in front of his face.

"Do you want something to eat?" Jonathan looks like he's not sure what to do, how to properly integrate her into his home when they aren't there on official monster destroying business.

"No, thanks."

He stills by the doorway to the hall, glancing between her and the door as if he expects someone else to come in and join them.

He's not thought this far ahead, she realizes. He seems torn between inviting her to sit here on the couch, or moving to the kitchen, or-

"Can I see those pictures?" She drops her book bag against the coffee table and looks down towards the hall.

He spares another look at the door, locked with the key and the deadbolt, and nods.

She's never seen his bedroom. She sees Will's some nights, in dreams where the lighter never catches and Steve doesn't run back in, doesn't show up at all, and she realizes how useless a revolver is against a science-fiction monster breaking through the wall.

Jonathan has posters on the wall, movies and bands she's not heard of, a decoration haphazardly hanging above his bed. A record player and space for cassette tapes too, half of which are stacked on his bedside table.

He pulls a box from under the bed, and she catches a glimpse of various familiar faces before he's bent over it, pulling out something.

"From the science fair?" He throws over his shoulder, and she leans against the door.

"Yeah, that's fine." *Whatever's fine. I just want to see how you're doing all of this, because I'm worried I'm losing it, you know?*

He drops a few on the bed (and it is made, Nancy notes, tucked in at the end and everything) and they settle against one another. Will, smiling over the trophy, Lucas and Mike making faces at each other across the stage, Dustin appearing very confused as Mr. Clarke singles him out during a speech.

There's one of Mrs. Byers, her arm around Will's shoulder, looking like that week in November never even happened at all.

She's not sure how he even managed to get all of these. They look like separate moments, each telling a whole story within itself, but the entire event wasn't even two hours.

"Wow."

Jonathan looks down at the bed.

"This is great." She steps up beside him, picks up the picture of Will and his mother. If she looks at it long enough, maybe they'll all forget the reality of what happened.

He glances over at it in her hands, and then she can feel him follow the curve of her arm to her shoulder, and back up to her face.

She sets the photo back down. The stack of records is just to her right, and she turns to run a finger over the edges.

"Can we listen to something?"

He looks over, takes a step back.

“Oh- yeah, sure. You pick.”

Rumors is resting on top. It feels a little mainstream for Jonathan, but she's always liked Stevie Nicks.

She holds it out, and he grabs it without moving towards her, arm outstretched completely.

When he puts it on the player Nancy lets her eyes run over the photos in the box. She sees Will and Mrs. Byers again, the same forest they wandered through. The outside of an abandoned house and even, to her amusement, *Steve*, leaning against his car with a smirk.

Second Hand News creeps in softly. Not her favorite, but hey.

Jonathan stands on the other side of the bed, his hand still resting atop the cover.

She crosses over to him, slow and steady steps, and perches just on the edge of the bed.

After a beat he follows suit, just beside her, eyes still downcast.

The music swells and she turns to ask him something, benign and unimportant, but he beats her to it.

“What do you dream about?” He asks, echoing their earlier conversation.

So much. All of it. Everything I can remember and everything that might have happened and everything that won't ever happen.

“I've dreamed about you.” It's true, and it's what she wants him to hear.

Jonathan narrows his eyes.

“Good or bad?”

“Both.”

They sit there for another minute, legs brushing, music playing.

“I dreamed about you, too.” He offers.

She wants so badly to ask what those dreams were, but that’s playing with fire, or maybe something worse.

She’s already there, though. She’s at his house, in his bedroom, and she’d be an idiot to not realize he feels *something* for her.

He scratches at the palm of his hand, and she sees the raised skin and reaches over before she can stop herself. His skin is soft under hers, malleable as she moves his hand, runs a finger down the seam of the scar. Her finger presses down, but he doesn’t flinch.

“Mine’s almost gone.” She whispers, turning her own hand over to show him.

“Oh.” Jonathan cranes his head down, and they knock foreheads before she can get out of the way.

“I’m- I’m so sorry.” He looks like he might as well have punched her, reaching up and drifting his fingers along her temple. “Are you okay?”

It wasn’t even hard, she’s taken worse from her mother’s driving. But she doesn’t pull away; his hands were warm in hers and now they’re warm on her face, and softer than anything she’s ever felt.

He’s close now, just *there*, and if she wanted to she could.

Faintly, somewhere very far away from them, she hears the swinging of a door, and Jonathan nearly jumps away from her.

She wants to pull him back and feel that warmth in his hands again, but there are voices in the living room now.

He stands up quickly, fumbles to turn off the music.

Nancy pushes her palms against her legs. She wants many terrible things, like to tell him she’s having a midlife crisis at 16 and sometimes she wonders if he’s the only one who will ever understand

what it was like for her.

“Nancy?”

He’s standing with a hand on the doorknob, mouth hanging open in another question.

She slips out into the hall before him, and they don’t get two steps before two other figures round the corner.

They both freeze, like someone pressed pause, Will’s gaze darting from her to his brother and over to his mother, who looks like she almost would have expected to come home to another house fire before this.

Will recovers first.

"Hi, Nancy." He chirps as he continues by them and into his room, the ensuing door slam echoing between the three of them in the hall.

Nancy almost envies his easy escape.

"Oh, *hi*, sweetheart," Mrs. Byers unfreezes, although the confusion doesn’t leave her face. "I didn't realize Jonathan was having anyone over."

"I was just leaving." She’s not sure if that’s true or not, but it feels right in the midst of Jonathan very noticeably glaring down at his shoes and Mrs. Byers struggling to not gape at a guest in her own house.

"Oh, no, it’s fine! You should stay for dinner." She moves forward and grabs Jonathan’s arm lightly, standing in front of both of them like she’ll prevent Nancy’s departure herself. "It’s not a problem."

"I didn’t tell my parents, I should probably just go—"

"You can call them—"

"*Mom.*" Jonathan looks like he’d prefer a supernatural abduction to this conversation. "She has to go."

Mrs. Byers gives a small smile to the both of them, before she moves back and releases Jonathan's arm.

"Right. Of course." She says. "It's really good to see you, Nancy. Please say hi to your mom and dad for me."

With that, Mrs. Byers brushes past them, turning into the kitchen.

Jonathan rubs at his eyes.

"I'm sorry." He mumbles, and she looks over.

He's blushing, she realizes. But that's wrong, in her head. Jonathan, strong and silent and sullen, doesn't blush because his mom tried to get a girl to stay for dinner.

"What?"

"She's been telling me to have you over for dinner since December." He drops the hand at last, and it's just his cheeks flushed red.

"It's April." Nancy offers.

Jonathan just nods.

The thought makes her want to laugh, but she's worried she'll embarrass him further, so she tries to turn it into a sympathizing look.

"I'll take you home." He says.

But she doesn't need that, she thinks. Her heart is thumping, and her hands are still sweaty, and it's not yet dark out.

"I'm gonna walk." She tells him. As she gathers her bag and gives a *goodbye, I'll see you at school*, he stays rooted to the spot in the hallway, looking up only when she's opening the door and giving him one last glance over her shoulder.

In the time it takes to get home she tries incredibly hard to forget the feeling of his hand in hers.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't know what level writing a scene to Rumors is, but I definitely never thought I'd reach it.

4. Chapter 4

The chill has just set in when she reaches her house. The sun's still in the sky but it feels like February somehow, not April.

But as she shuts the door and half-heartedly greets her father in the living room, she nearly doesn't feel it. Instead of goosebumps on her arms there's adrenaline in her veins, heat in her chest. She's not sure why, but she feels like something's peeled off of her and left her fresh and new again.

Nancy gets to her room and drops her bag, sinks down onto her bed. A hand brushes over the blue plastic of her phone, and as soon as the idea's entered her head she's following through with it.

Her fingers dial Steve's number without much thought. He answers with a mumbled 'Hello?' and she doesn't bother to return the greeting.

"Will you come over?"

"Now?"

Nancy can almost hear him think it over. It's only 5 o'clock, he could come for dinner and leave after and they would go on acting like they're still in this relationship where they orbit each other for designated amounts of time and then don't speak for days.

"I already ate." Steve sounds sad, somehow.

"Later." She pushes the word out. "Come over tonight."

Tonight is something they've not done in a while, and the apprehension nearly shoots through the phone and zaps her in the ear.

"Are you sure?" He asks, as if she's just offered up something she really, really shouldn't have.

Sometimes Steve is so good, too good now.

"Yeah." It's so quiet she thinks he almost didn't hear, until he

mumbles an affirmative and then a quick *good-bye*, and the dial tone sounds.

That's not a great sign.

Dinner is quiet and uncomfortable. Mike barely eats, Holly throws a fit when she doesn't get cookies for dessert, and their dad is more or less unconcerned with the entire show.

Nancy excuses herself early, takes her mostly full plate to the kitchen and sneaks a last glance in the dining room.

Mike is pushing at a piece of broccoli, eyes downcast. He looks up suddenly and squints at her, all the way across the room and over the counter.

She thinks he can read her mind, tell what she's trying to do next. Maybe, out of everyone, it's Mike she should have known would understand her.

She sneaks out the kitchen before he can see too much of the fear written all over her face.

It's half past eight when there's a knock on her window. Her reflection imposed over his half-lit face, giving the best grin he can muster. Steve's hair is deflating, creeping down over his forehead and there's a tear on his jacket, presumably from crawling up the rooftop.

He's out of practice. It shows in his ambling move into her room too, his feet catching on the windowsill.

She doesn't let him shut the window, wraps her arms around his neck and presses her mouth to his.

It's easy, to go through the motions. There's a breeze blowing in the open window but she focuses on the fire inside, tries to match it to the feeling of his body against hers. She thinks she almost manages it, yet when she reaches for his belt it's Steve who grasps her hands and

pulls them off.

"What are you doing?" He looks caught off guard, deer in the headlights.

"Do you need me to explain it?" She teases, pushing up against him.

Steve takes a full step back, until he bumps into the window seat.

"Nancy," He swipes a hand through his hair, an unfamiliar look playing across his face. "What are you doing?"

That's a ridiculous question. *What the hell does he think she's doing?*

"I want to-" She steps back too, almost on reflex, until the distance between them would have to be crossed in a conscious decision. "I want you."

Steve frowns, and it's so drastically different from his usual expression that she thinks she almost doesn't recognize him.

"I thought you were going to break up with me tonight." He says it like a confession, like it was both a hope and a fear.

"What?"

In complete honesty, the thought never crossed her mind. She can tell they're disintegrating, slowly melting away from each other, but never for a second does she want to cut that tie completely.

Steve is Before, he's everything normal suburban girls want and if she lets that go, that means admitting she isn't normal, can never be normal again.

In this excruciatingly awkward pause, lengthening between their hard breathing, it dawns *that* is what he was asking at the diner. Their normals are two separate ideas, they're operating on different planes, and even *this* isn't going to bring them together.

Steve shoves both hands into his pockets, and he's no longer the popular boy, the first person she ever really, *really* wanted. He's just seventeen and as unsure about anything as she is.

"I don't-" She feels something rising inside of her, and *god*, she hopes it's not what little she ate of dinner. "What are you talking about?"

He draws in a deep breath, like he's preparing himself for something. It's odd, how even as she can tell he hates this, this conversation, this thing he's about to do, he looks confident in it. Shoulders thrown back, spine straight, eyes focused on her.

"When was the last time we kissed?" He starts, and she wants to roll her eyes.

"Just now." *Dummy*.

"No, before that." He looks like he's got a real point to make. "When was it?"

That's easy. He took her to the baseball game last week, she kissed him goodbye in the car when he dropped her off.

She tells him as much, only to be met with an exasperated look.

"That wasn't a *kiss*, that was like... Shaking hands with our mouths."

Where does he get this stuff?

"It's okay, I'm not mad about it." He's pacing now, back and forth in his muddy shoes across her carpeted floor. "But I can't do it any more. And I don't think we should, either-"

"Do what?"

He makes a pained face, teeth clenched. He's really, *really* bad at this, it turns out.

"Okay, *that*- That night," Steve breaks off, but he doesn't really need to say any more. She knows what he's talking about. "That wasn't me. I mean, it was, but- I don't want it to be. I can't do that again."

"I'm not asking you to."

But she is, sort of, and they both know it. He knows *her*, even with the distance that's grown between them. He knows about the gun and

the flashlight she keeps under her pillow, the drills she's dreamt up so she's ready. Just in case.

Steve looks like he's got more to say, a whole list of reasons built up inside of him, but he catches her eye and falls silent.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Nancy lets the question escape out of her mouth, soft and quiet even with what's moving harsh within her, and it nearly floats out the window before he responds.

"Why didn't you?"

It's childish and stupid. But fair.

She doesn't know what else to say, and Steve's stopped pacing but still looks like he almost wants to bolt.

The moment extends, and she's trying to think of a way to indicate *It's okay if you stay but I'm probably going to cry soon*, when he reaches for her hand.

"I'm sorry." He says, once again this new person she doesn't know, the one he became while she was falling apart. "It sucks."

And then, his face shifts to the smallest smile, eyes soft.

"Nancy Wheeler," It sounds like a pet name rolling off his tongue. "Don't waste your time."

She's not sure what he means by that, but like a comic book hero or a boy who is terrible at confrontation, he slips out the window again and leaves.

The kids at school don't say anything.

She half expects it, coming in on Monday. She thinks at least Tommy and Carol will come to tell her how stupid she is, how surely she can never do better, even idiots like Steve realize the truth about girls

like her-

But nobody says anything at all. Nobody even sends her a dirty look in the halls.

It's lonelier, somehow. She never realizes how much Steve was *there* until he wasn't. And there's no one to eat lunch with or walk her to class or meet at her locker when school ends.

As most things do, it comes back to Barb. Barb would have gladly talked crap about Steve on the phone all night, even if neither of them believed it. Barb would have invited her over after school so they could watch old movies and pretend to not care about homework.

She walks home after school, two miles in black heeled boots.

There's a group of boys in her living room, huddled around a coffee table and whispering to each other.

Nancy pauses, backpack pushed up against the door.

Lucas whispers *That doesn't mean anything* and Mike says something under his breath, and Will starts coughing and can't stop.

Dustin gets him a glass of water and they keep on with the conversation, like this isn't out of the ordinary.

She's still in the entranceway when Will rushes out of the living room and shoots up the stairs.

The boys continue talking amongst themselves, something about their next campaign. If they're bothered by his sudden exit, it doesn't show.

Nancy follows up the stairs, pauses outside of her bedroom door. She can hear the water running in the bathroom, and then another spat of coughing. Louder, aggressive.

The hallway floor creaks as she steps across.

"Will?"

The water shuts off. The room is silent for a few seconds, before the door swings open with force and he looks up at her.

“Hi, Nancy.” He sounds just like he did at their house, normal and happy and healthy. “Do you need the bathroom?”

“Are you okay?” She counters, and he slips by her.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Will pushes his hair out of his eyes, forcing a tight smile.

Nancy watches him inch down the hallway, doing his best to be subtle about it. He gives her a half of a wave at the top of the steps, and then disappears from her view.

The school dance is the first week of May. She tells her mom she’s got a fever, stomach ache, headache. She curls up under the covers in track pants and a t-shirt, blinking over at the cracks in the wall.

“I’m so sorry,” Her mother whispers, wipes her hand across her forehead. “I’m sure Steve’s disappointed.”

Right, yeah. Sure.

Nancy doesn’t have the effort to correct her. She’s not sure if Steve will even be there tonight. She knows he’d be happy enough to go with friends, but now that he doesn’t have Tommy and Carol, she realizes she’s not sure who his friends even are.

“How about some soup?”

She sweeps out of the room with that promise, and Nancy shuts her eyes and attempts to block out the sound of the television downstairs and the music in Mike’s room, white noise molding around her ears until she passes out.

She's driving Mike to school, one hand on the wheel, the other playing with the radio. He's going on about a chemistry project, some accident Dustin had in class that resulted in somebody almost losing an eyebrow.

She makes the turn towards the middle school, but there's no building up ahead of them, just that endless stretch of highway.

The song switches on the radio. She can't tell where she recognizes it from, but she knows the beat in the back of her head.

"Do you think she'll come back?" Mike asks suddenly, and, as always in dreams, she knows exactly what he's talking about.

"Yeah." She *does*, really. Somethings just *have* to happen, don't they?

"When?" He presses, and when she doesn't respond, he repeats it. "*When?* I can't wait any longer."

He sounds like he's Holly's age. Not almost a teenager, not a boy nearly matching her in height.

"Me either." She confesses.

Mike lets out a sigh, like she's too much for him to contend with.

She makes the turn onto the same road, but nothing's changed. There's emptiness out in front of them.

"What's wrong with us?" Mike props a foot up on the dashboard.

"Nothing." Nancy pauses, reconsiders. "Everything."

He pushes his foot into the plastic until it leaves a mark. She wants to do the same, only she remembers she's the one driving.

"Shit." Mike says, voice flat. "Dammit."

The song gets louder in the car, filling up the space between them. It's Fleetwood Mac, isn't it?

Of course it is. *Of course, of course.*

“Dammit.” She agrees. Dammit all.

She wakes up feeling sweaty and hot, as if she really had a fever to break.

There’s chilling soup on her nightstand and a mug of tea beside it.

Mike’s music is still playing, the TV still on downstairs. Everything just the way she left it. Unchanging, immobile, suburbia.

It seems like Jonathan’s consciously avoiding her at school now. Whereas before he crept in from the edges, he seems to now have receded once again, faded away into the background.

She doesn’t know how to make him come back.

Maybe he heard about Steve. By now everyone heard about Steve, and while he does his best, says *hi* in the hall and even sits with her in the library once or twice, it’s still-

Awkward, at best.

Nancy passes by the darkroom on purpose, treks all the way up to the floor so she can cross between the classrooms and come down the back staircase. It’s convoluted and a little bit pathetic, probably.

But he’s not there, anyway. And if he was, what is there to say?

Hey, so- Steve and I are over. Yeah, no, it sucked. But anyway, I’m ready to get back out there, so maybe we could go out sometime. ‘Cause, obviously, everybody knows you have the hots for me, right?

God. She should work on that pitch.

But it's not fair if she dumps her boyfriend (or is it gets dumped? She's still not certain who pulled the trigger) and immediately attaches herself to his side. Not fair to either of *them*, not fair to her.

She's not some afternoon soap opera, there are bigger factors in this decision, in *all* of her decisions, than who she wants to kiss more. More important things at play, things that affect her life and who she thinks she is. Or was. Or will be, this time next week, next year.

She kisses the top of Mike's head when he finds his way into her bedroom past midnight, once more curling in on himself like he can't take the weight of the world.

He doesn't cry anymore, but his shoulders shake and he heaves in and out in an imitation of it anyway. He falls asleep in her bed, spreading out his arms and legs and there's no room left for her to crawl back in.

Nancy sneaks over to his room in retaliation, curls up in the patterned sheets. His clock ticks softly beside her head, and she feels overgrown and out of place in this child-sized bed. Her feet hit the end board if she stretches, and the blankets don't quite cover her body.

Sleep continues to escape her, so she counts the names in the movie posters adorning his room, tries to remember when he bought each of them. Third grade, fourth grade, last summer.

The sun peeks through the open curtains and she's still counting.

At midnight one night Nancy scribbles her phone number down in a spare page from her Biology notes. She slips it into his locker the next day, and waits, waits, *waits*.

It's four days before the phone rings. 8 o'clock, just after Mom puts Holly to bed. She answers after a single ring; there's no one else it would be.

"Hello?"

There's a beat, and then she hears him clear his throat.

"Nancy?"

"Yeah?"

"It's, uh, it's Jonathan."

She's glad he can't see her smile at that.

"Yeah, I know."

"Oh." He clears his throat again.

She wonders how often he's done this. She and Barb used to talk nearly every night. They would spend hours planning weekend trips and school outfits. She got used to it, the comfort in having someone else *there*, without really being there.

But she knows he's never quite had anyone like that, not until-

Well. *Maybe*.

Jonathan's silent for so long she wonders if he's accidentally hung up.

"Nancy?"

"Yeah?"

She hears a scratching sort of sound, like he's moving the receiver in his hand.

"How are you?" He asks after a second.

Good is on the tip of her tongue. *Fine. Well.*

They're all lies, and she's tired of telling them. Tired of feeling so sad,

and angry, and *sorry* all of the time.

“I’m scared.” She tells him, because it’s the truth, and because she wants so desperately for someone else to know.

There’s a pause.

“Right now?”

“All the time.”

Another beat. She can picture him, fingers tight around the phone, hair falling in his face. Eyebrows knit together, the encompassing way he looks at a problem.

Jonathan sighs.

“Me too.”

She reloads the gun.

The bullets are hidden in her nightstand, under an old report on *The Scarlet Letter* and a ripped folder from her band days. They slide in with satisfying clicks, until she pops the cylinder back into place.

It's heavier now, but she wraps tight fingers around the grip and takes in a long, slow breath.

The gun goes back into the closet, within the shoebox this time, in case Mom thinks of snooping around in her room. Safety on, resting peacefully.

Ready, just in case.

Notes for the Chapter:

So this should be wrapped up with one more chapter... Fingers crossed my brain doesn't keep throwing up feelings.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been 84 years.

I'm sorry for taking such a long hiatus! I originally uploaded part of this as chapter 5, then decided I wanted to combine it with what I had planned for chapter 6, deleted it and tried to rewrite, and failed. I tried so hard to wrap this up in one more chapter but it would have been incredibly long and I wouldn't have posted it for ages. So here's this, and fingers crossed the next update (which will absolutely be the last or y'all are allowed to smack me in the face) doesn't take quite so long.

School ends with a sigh.

She passes her exams with flying colors, honors list, a handwritten note from her math teacher telling her what a great student she is.

Steve has an end of the year party. It's warm enough to put the pool to good use, but despite his sincerity, the invitation feels like little more than courtesy.

Nancy tries to tell herself they can still be friends. They have to be, who else has seen what they've seen?

Well, besides the obvious.

She doesn't think Jonathan would go either, even though she knows Steve would have asked him. A houseful of people who still think he's as weird as the rumors probably doesn't appeal to him.

At least he's left alone now, for the most part. They used to make fun of him, but when he came back after break, once the whole town knew Will had disappeared and reappeared and a thousand other things might have happened, no one really bothered anymore.

Maybe having everyone think you set your own house on fire does

that.

The end of school blends into the beginning of summer, no daily schedule and long stretches of time she can't fill any more.

Mike says she should get a job.

"They're hiring at the pool." He suggests, but she knows it's only so he and the boys can get in for free.

She fills out an application anyway, breaststrokes her way through the test and ends up ten feet above squabbling kids who don't read the No Running signs.

It's better than suffocating in her room, nothing to stop her from thinking about everything that went wrong in her life in the past seven months. She unloads frozen hamburgers and fills out forms to avoid the stillness that brings back the darkness of that not-right world, the last time she saw Barb's face, the sound of Mike crying himself to sleep, the feeling of slipping through the cracks and almost being lost for good.

"How's Steve doing?" Her mother asks at dinner, as Holly tries her best to avoid eating her soup.

Nancy slides a knife through her chicken.

"We broke up." She says matter-of-factly, and her mom gives a slow nod.

"Oh," She looks over with that classic Mom look, concern and love and hope wrapped up in one. "I see."

Mike helps her wipe down the dishes, and she sees the question in his

eyes before he voices it.

"What happened with Steve?" He asks, trying way too hard to be casual about it.

"Lots of stuff."

"I thought you said he was better-"

"He was. It wasn't about that."

Mike dips his head and keeps wiping down the plates.

It pours and the pool closes for two days in a row for flooding. Mike's at Lucas', Mom's at the store, Dad's on a business trip and the house creaks with every move she makes. It wants to swallow her up, all alone in a room that doesn't feel like hers anymore.

Her raincoat is neon pink, leftover from eighth grade, but it still fits. The station wagon keys are in a bowl in the kitchen, and Nancy pulls out of the garage before contemplating where there is to go.

Left at the end of her street, right onto the main road, two miles down-

There are only so many places to go in a small town. That's the only reason the route is muscle memory, she tells herself, from driving Mike for their science fair meetings.

Not from watching Jonathan take the shortcut leaving the police station, straight through the mall parking lot and down an alley, right up to their little street.

The little green car's gone but she can see his in the driveway, big and bulky, rain bouncing off of the rusted hood.

The car turns off and she sits for a moment. This isn't weird, right? The last time she was here they sat on his bed and held hands, just

normal friend stuff.

They *can* be friends. She'd love a friend, right now. More than anything.

Jonathan opens after one quick knock; he must have been expecting someone else.

"Hey." He smiles at her, hand curving around the edge of the door. He looks happy, happier than she's seen him at school. He steps aside and she stumbles in, pink raincoat dripping on the floor.

"Are you okay?"

That's a fair question, she did come over with no warning and no invitation in the pouring rain.

"Yeah, I just, um-" Nancy tugs on the plastic sleeves of the jacket, trying to come up with a way to make it all sound less crazy. "I was bored."

That just makes it sound like he's an afterthought, but Jonathan doesn't seem to take it poorly.

"Right." He moves away from the door, coming to stand next to her in front of the couch. He makes a short motion with his hand, bumping her arm accidentally.

"Do you want to take that off?"

Yeah, she probably shouldn't leak water all over their house.

The raincoat looks childish hanging beside his worn jean jacket, Will's black coat. Thunder claps outside and she turns away from the door.

The couch creaks like the floorboards of her house as she sits, but the sound doesn't seem so frightening here. Or maybe it's *with* someone else here.

There are two glasses resting on the coffee table. Jonathan sinks down onto the couch beside her and moves some of the papers: Will's

drawings, homework, fliers.

She thinks she spies *Have You Seen Me?* scribbled atop one, but Jonathan stows them away under the table before it registers.

“Are you glad school’s over?” He asks, something to fill the space, because really, she’s giving him nothing.

“Yes.” *All kids are happy when school’s out, right?* Nancy presses her lips together, then amends her story. “No. Not really.”

Jonathan shifts in his seat.

“I heard you’re working at the pool.” He offers instead. “How’s that?”

Boring, hot, monotonous.

“It’s... Something to do.” She offers, but it doesn’t seem like enough. “I just mean, it’s hard when I’m... When I don’t have-”

There’s no way to explain it. The feelings that build up when she’s alone for too long, the insane self-doubt that’s permeated since last November.

“When you can’t distract yourself?” He asks the question to his hands, folded on his knees.

Nancy exhales.

“Yeah.”

Jonathan keeps looking down.

“I, uh-” He clears his throat, echoing in the room against the backdrop of the storm outside. “Me too.”

What a pair they make.

He moves over an inch, rubs his hands against his knees. Another pang of thunder, and then he sighs.

“At least Mom thinks I’m finally embracing high school, or something.” He says it like a natural progression of their

conversation, but she fails to connect the dots.

Nancy frowns.

“What?”

“The... Distractions. I mean, you’re not-“ He rubs his hand on his knee. “Having people over has helped. Me, I mean. And it makes Mom happy, so-”

“People?”

Jonathan colors, just slightly, like he’s embarrassed.

“Just- You came over, that day after school.”

Way back in April, she remembers. But he says it like it could have happened last week, like he’s still thinking about it.

“And, um, Steve was here the other day.”

Oh. That one she wasn’t expecting. Nancy looks over at him but he’s still staring at the coffee table intently.

“Are you guys-“ Friends? Buddies? Weirdly connected through that time we all set a monster on fire and almost died? “Do you hang out?”

Jonathan makes a face.

“Not really. He just kind of showed up.”

That sounds about right.

There’s a tug in her gut when she thinks about them spending time together. But isn’t that idiotic? They have as much of a right to be friends as anyone else. After all, they’re the same age, they’ve lived in the same town, gone to the same school all their lives, and last fall they fought the same monster. The idea that she’s the only thing that they might have in common is selfish, at best.

Besides, she’s hardly one to talk for just showing up.

“That’s nice.” She says, because hopefully it was.

“Yeah.” Jonathan nods. And then, like he’s reassuring himself too, he repeats it. “Yeah.”

Nancy glances over, and it feels like the first time she’s really faced him all night. He still has bags under his eyes, permanent marks she’s beginning to realize might never go away. His hair’s not flat across his forehead like it usually is, the rain or maybe nervous hands pushed it up.

He doesn’t fidget under her gaze. She’s seen him make those fake smiles, flat and forced, when people talk to him, or try and sink into himself. But he matches her eyes and looks back, not grinningly happy, but not put off.

She knows him well enough by now to know that most people make him uncomfortable, or at least awkward. There’s a weird sense of pride that comes up knowing she isn’t one of them anymore.

“We should,” The thought comes out of her mouth instantly, and she briefly swallows it down, so it doesn’t sound like a rush of feeling pouring out of her. “We should see each other. More.”

Jonathan looks down for an instant, then snaps back up. The corner of his mouth rises, and he nods.

He follows through on it.

He’s there twenty minutes early to pick up Will and they talk about whatever’s out at the movie theatre, the new restaurant that opened up down the block. Dustin’s new dog and how Mike’s begging their parents to get one too, like he didn’t already find something and bring it home and look how that turned out.

She shouldn’t have said that. It was supposed to be a joke, but some things-

Jonathan doesn't say anything.

When she drops off Mike and Lucas at the Byers another afternoon he's made more sandwiches, turkey and mayo and lemonade, even. She eats this time, a sandwich and a half, and Mike says she could probably match Dustin if he was here.

They even go to the park one afternoon, take the Byers dog along so it doesn't feel like it's just the two of them, tracing the edge of the woods. Jonathan stops every now and then with the camera, snapping a tree or a kid on the swings before he rushes to catch up. He never asks her to wait, or announces what he's doing. It's like he doesn't want to inconvenience her walk.

The dog's horrible on the leash and Jonathan keeps apologizing for that too, they don't walk him much, he's kind of a nutcase.

When he drops her off at home she asks if he'll let her see those pictures, and confusion crosses his face before he smiles, like he'd never had expected her to even notice.

"Yeah." He says, affirmative, definitely, absolutely. *Yeah.*

The pool's never very crowded, so she doesn't mind letting Mike and his friends in. They're not the kids who throw street signs in the deep end and pee in the baby pool anyway.

Jesus, there are some weird people in this town.

One day Mike asks her to come meet them at the gate so he doesn't get asked where his pool pass is, and it's not just Lucas and Dustin, pool noodles and goggles in tow, and Will, hefting a bag of snacks, but Jonathan too, lingering behind his brother and looking very out of place.

"Hi." She says as Mike tries to snatch the best of the noodles from his friends. It suddenly feels very apparent that the lifeguard suit is bright red, god-awfully bright red, an eyesore.

Jonathan seems unconcerned.

“Hey.” He shuffles back a step, absentmindedly taking the bag Will pushes into his hands as the boys rush off.

An older couple tries to move past the two of them, stuck in between the metal bars of the gate at the goddamn community pool, so she takes his arm and tugs him away.

She works the snack shack and he sits at the bar, eating Twizzlers and a burger she refuses to let him pay for and talking about, of all things, homework.

He can pass Chemistry and Algebra if he does the coursework over the summer, he says. After Will, his grades kind of plummeted, but everyone’s been pretty understanding, for the most part.

Nancy feels bad. She hadn’t noticed anything like that. But they didn’t talk for nearly five months, so it was probably that.

Jonathan doesn’t seem to mind that she just popped back into his life. In and out, really. Just like November.

He periodically looks out across the rows of chairs and squints at the kids diving off the board, to where they can both see Will dangling his feet off the wall as his friends playfully push at one another.

For a second she thinks of asking him about the coughing, something that still knocks around in the back of her mind. Some days Will looks fine, but some days he’s pale and tired, sticking to the sidelines while the boys pretend not to notice.

But Jonathan turns back before she can say anything, and his expression changes softly, eyebrows dropping as he hunches forward.

“I’m sorry.” He says, and then pauses for so long she almost thinks he’s beginning a new thought when he tacks her name on the end. “Nancy.”

“What?” For coming to where she works? For being friends? No, no, this is good, this is nice.

Jonathan looks back down at the counter.

“I mean, for- for Steve. And all that. I’m sorry.”

You didn’t have anything to do with it, she wants to say, too aggressive, too defensive.

“I know it was a bit ago, but-“

“No, thanks.” She hopes it sounds sincere.

He twists his mouth, and the conversation has gotten away from her.

Mike rushes over, wet arms leaning on the counter, and asks for four ice cream sandwiches.

“Two dollars.”

Mike barks out a laugh.

“They aren’t free?”

“Absolutely not.” She refutes, and he gives an award worthy eye roll.

“Come on, Nancy.”

Come on? She’s not running a side business here.

“Come back with money.”

“That’s not fair.” Mike complains, like Holly when they take away her toy for bedtime.

“Fair?”

“So just Jonathan gets free stuff?” He snaps, and immediately looks like he regrets it.

Nancy grits her teeth. There’s a pause, before all three of them try to talk at the same time.

“I can pay, if you don’t-“

“No-“

“It’s just ice cream-

“I’ll get theirs-“

“No.” She can’t argue with the both of them at once, so she focuses on Mike. “You can’t get in for free and get free food too.”

He looks at her wide wide eyes, anger and something else brimming, but doesn’t say anything else.

Out of the corner of her eye she can see Jonathan slide off the stool, fumble in his pockets, and push some bills across the counter.

“I’ll see you later.” He mumbles, somewhere between her and Mike, and then he disappears.

“I’m sorry.”

Mike pushes at the door with his pointer finger, inching it open until he can peer in.

Sorry.

“I was being an asshole.” The door goes another few inches, and she can see his shaggy head, hair creeping down past his ears, eyes darting around her room instead of looking at her.

“Yeah.”

He steps into the room, sock feet silent on the carpet, spins around and shuts her door.

Nancy closes her eyes. It’s been a long day, and going to bed at 8:30 sounds pretty appealing.

“You don’t have to give me stuff. If you don’t want to.” Mike proposes.

“Good.”

He sighs, and she hears the click of the door being locked.

“Nancy?”

She peeks her eyes open, squinting up at the ceiling.

“What?”

“Can we talk?”

It’s hard to understand how he goes from throwing a fit like a toddler to sounding half a man, but maybe that’s being thirteen.

“Fine.” She pushes herself up to sitting, leaning back against the headboard.

Mike moves towards her, hops up on her bed like he’s far too used to it by now. He runs a finger over the flower pattern on her blankets for a moment, biding his time.

Nancy crosses her legs.

“Is Jonathan your boyfriend?” He asks, peeking up at her from beneath those overgrown bangs.

“No.”

He starts on another flower, nail scraping the material in a repetitive, soothing motion.

“Do you like him?”

“He’s my friend.” She answers, and Mike scoffs, just a little.

“Yeah, but do you like him?”

It sounds so easy when he puts it like that. It a yes or no answer, gray area be damned.

When she doesn’t answer, he lets out a big sigh.

"I lied." He whispers, voice dropping down. "You asked if I liked El, and I lied."

She knows. That was a long time ago, but even then, it was obvious.

"I liked her a lot." Mike bunches the covers in his hands, abandoning his patterns. He looks as if he might cry again, like those first nights, all curled up beside her in the bed.

Nancy covers his hand with hers, until he releases the blankets.

"I'm sorry." She tells him. Sorry for Eleven, and Barb, and Will, and everything else that happened to them that week.

Mike moves back, and she pulls her hand away.

"You should ask him out." He raises his head again. "He'd say yes."

"I don't think--"

"He really likes you. Will says he talks about you at home and stuff."

"I don't think you should tell me that."

Mike shrugs. He meets her eyes, and there's a new boy staring back at her.

"There's a lot of crazy shit out there, right?" He's sure of himself, or at least of whatever wisdom he's trying to impart on her. "It's not good to waste your time."

Why does everyone think that's what she's doing?

"You could be monster bait tomorrow." He smiles, but it's really not a joke, is it?

Mike slips off of her bed with that delightful image, and heads for the door with a *good night*, Nancy.

"Good night." She choruses.

The door shuts again.

She dreams there's a picture of her buried in that box under his bed. Not the one from Steve's party, but one where she's looking straight at the camera, wide grin, *happy*. The way she looks in the pictures on her own wall, the way she wonders if she'll ever feel again.

Jonathan drops Will off for a sleepover the next night and declines to mention the pool. They make awkward small talk in the kitchen -the dog chewed up his pillow, Hopper's trying to show him how to repair the shed door- until her mom sweeps in, forces cookies on him and sits him next to her on the couch. He looks completely out of his element, back stiff, leg bouncing as her dad asks him about potential colleges and future plans.

She's not sure why they're doing this, they've met him a hundred times before and never cared enough to ask if he wants to major in the arts. But in the middle of Jonathan struggling to explain how he and his mom are starting to make Will's Halloween costume, Nancy catches her own mother's eye, and sees the smile that spreads across her face.

Oh, dammit.

Jonathan leaves with another container of cookies, and a short wave to her.

The door swings shut, and her mom spins around with the same smirk, a devious sort of look in her eye that Nancy hasn't seen since she quit the PTA.

"Jonathan's very sweet." She says, only she's really saying eight other things that Nancy doesn't have the time to deal with.

She doesn't respond.

“You two have been spending some time together.”

Why do parents always phrase it like that? *Spending some time together*- she *spends some time* with seven-year-old Brent Summers at the pool every day for swimming lessons, but her mom wouldn't bother to ask about that.

“We're friends.” Nancy says, feeling like a broken record.

“I'm glad.” Mom tells her, and she escapes upstairs before she's subjected to any further interrogation about who she hangs out with.

Jonathan calls later that night, to thank her for the cookies. It's past ten, later than they usually talk on the phone. They get through half a conversation about her mother's baking habits, before he abruptly switches the topic.

“How's-your-weekend?” He says it so fast it's almost one word.

She switches the receiver to the other ear.

“What?”

There's a few seconds of silence, and then he clears his throat.

“Are you busy?” This is slightly slower, but still about five times faster than his normal speech.

“This weekend?” *God*, why are they both so awkward about this?

“Yeah. This weekend.”

Nancy tries to pretend she's not gripping the phone a little tighter as she answers.

“I'm free on Sunday.”

Another moment of silence passes, and she holds her breath.

“Okay.” He says at last. “Do you want- We could go to the park. Again. Chester’s kind of sick, but, um, it could just be us.”

It’s not really a question, but she guesses it’s as close as Jonathan’s going to get.

“Yeah, that sounds-“ There’s a rustling on his end, then she hears a soft *I’m on the phone*, and an answering sigh that sounds more like surprise than frustration.

“Sorry, Nancy.”

She wonders if he can hear the smile in her voice.

“That sounds fun.” She says. “I’d like that.”

“Oh,” Jonathan sounds like he was expecting a very different answer. “Me too.”

It’s not *really* a date. They’ve done this before, after all.

But it’s different this time because they’ve planned it, and she has three days to anticipate it. She puts on her pink dress and brushes her hair too many times, readjusts her watch over and over until there’s a knock on the door.

He’s wearing a button down shirt she’s never seen before, and his hair is half-combed to the side, like someone put some effort into making him look presentable before he finally shook them off.

“Hey.” He rocks back and forth on his feet, glancing briefly at her dress before snapping his eyes back to hers.

“Hey.”

They’re stuck there for a moment, front door open, looking at each other.

Jonathan blinks and straightens up, as if waking himself up.

“Should we?”

Yes, she wants to shout, but settles for a quick nod.

The park is crowded but Jonathan parks down by the river, avoiding most of the kids by the playground. They follow the footpath around the water, talking about the boys and the first day of school and anything else she can think of, because whenever it gets too quiet she gets the urge to do something really stupid, like touch him.

Without the dog, Nancy finds that he takes much longer steps than her, and they have to find a rhythm together. He keeps reaching up to mess with his hair, until it's a far cry from the pristine look he was sporting earlier.

He gets excited when she tells him she's going to be taking classes at the junior college starting in September.

“You could probably get in anywhere.” He says with admiration, and it makes something warm trickle down her spine.

“I don't know about that.”

“No, really. You're brilliant. And qualified.” He smiles softly, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. “And badass.”

She wants to take his hand, but he's got them in his pockets, and before she can work up the nerve to reach out, he speeds up just a bit and she falls out of step.

It starts raining just before nightfall. They load back into the car, and head back to her house. The drive is quiet; her legs are beginning to feel a little sore and she's sure the tiredness is setting in for him as well. Nonetheless, as he pulls up in front of her house, Nancy pushes herself to ask a question.

“Do you want to come in?”

He looks a bit pale, but maybe it's just the lighting.

“I don't know, I should probably, um-“

“We have more cookies.” That's a lame bribe, but she's not sure what else to say. *Remember that time you slept over forever ago? Maybe we could repeat that, except we're both under the covers. Or on top. I'm not picky.*

Jonathan gnaws on his lip.

“My mom would kill me if I didn't send you home with some casserole, or something.”

He concedes to that with a half-smile, and Nancy feels a jolt of nerves in her chest.

It feels so *normal*. Frighteningly normal, to be nervous about a *boy* and not a flesh-eating monster or a parallel universe or a missing best friend.

As Jonathan leans against the kitchen counter and nibbles on a chocolate chip cookie, Nancy makes a decision. She's fought the supernatural and fired a gun and made it through almost a whole year of nightmares; she is more than capable of doing *this*.

She takes his hand, like she wanted to so badly in the park, like she did that afternoon in his bedroom. Their fingers slip together and Jonathan's eyes widen, staring down at her from a messy fringe.

“Jonathan?” She asks, and he reaches for her other hand in response, only he must have forgotten he was still holding half the cookie because it crumbles between them.

Nancy smiles, and he smiles back, and she tries to move towards him but suddenly her feet won't do what she tells them and the room is sort of spinning and she's excited and terrified all at once.

It happens like this: He kisses her.

In dreams she moves first, hands on his cheeks or his shoulders or winding around his neck like the covers of the romance novels they sell at the grocery check out.

But maybe she's always underestimated Jonathan. Because when her body seems to seize up and she can't bridge the gap, he tilts forward and meets her.

He's not *great* at it. His lips are dry and he doesn't know what to do with the rest of his body, so he's just sort of pushed up against her, backing her into the fridge.

But it's nice and true and *them*, alone in her kitchen, fridge handle digging into her back and his lips sweet against hers, until there's footsteps up the stairs from the basement and a voice hisses *Oh shit*.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

The trailer breathed ST life into me and I am back, y'all.

Jonathan peels out of the house in a second, so fast she wonders if his feet even hit the ground at all.

Mike's stuck in the doorway, hand on the knob, and when she turns to look at him he at least has the decency to appear vaguely apologetic.

"I'm so-" He trips over his words, and his eyes flick from her face to the hallway Jonathan's just marathoned sprinted down. "I'm so sorry, Nancy, I didn't- I didn't realize-"

He acts like they had been *going at it* in her bedroom, rather than a closed mouth kiss against a kitchen appliance.

She stays there, flush against the cold plastic, until Mike unsticks himself and bolts back down into the basement.

The phone doesn't ring that night.

Nancy lays in bed and waits for it, for his soft voice to try and explain it away before she says *I've wanted to do that forever*, and he goes quiet before he laughs and says *me too*, and asks her out to the movies or a nice restaurant, or something unique and *Jonathan* like a concert or a walk in the park or-

By midnight she's accepted he's not going to call. She feels foolish, childish, naive. Little girls lay awake in bed and wait for boys they like to call them. Women who have loaded guns in their closet don't bother with boys, do they?

It's a week before she hears from him again. September's around the corner and she's planning on back to school shopping, new supplies and new cardigans and something that says *hello senior year, I conquered a monster and I can conquer this*.

The phone rings just before dinner. She's trying to decide if she should add a new backpack to her list; her old one has served her well but if that hole gets any bigger she'll lose a textbook out of it.

She's almost surprised to hear his familiar *Nancy?* when she answers. No one else calls her, not any more, but after all *that* (a chaste kiss and radio silence, plus six nights of trying not to think of the way he smiled) she thought maybe, just maybe, she'd let things change too much, too fast.

Jonathan snuffles, and instantly the nerves drop from her chest to her stomach.

"Will's sick." He lets out a breath, and she can almost feel it on her ear.

"With what?"

There's a pause. She thinks of him in the kitchen, holding the phone with both hands the way he does, his eyebrows pushed together and that *look* on his face he's already at fault, somehow, someday.

"I don't know. Mom's taking him to the doctor tomorrow. He won't stop coughing."

"Maybe it's a cold." She says, and then remembers they don't need to tell each other lies any more.

It's definitely not a cold.

The main line rings at 10 the next night. It's Jonathan, and in between his rushed words and shouting off the line to someone else, she gathers that something's very wrong with Will.

The metal barrel of the gun feels cold in her palm, but she slips it down the back of her jeans and tucks her jacket over top of it.

It doesn't feel necessary, not yet, but it gives her the same boost of confidence.

Their mother yells something as they both rush out the front door, about being back before midnight and calling if they need anything else.

Mike's bouncing in the front seat as they drive over, hands under his thighs, lip firmly between his teeth.

Lucas and Dustin in the backseat are silent. In the quiet of the night the drive to the Byers seems to take hours, days.

The boys all throw open their doors before she even comes to a complete stop. The front door is open, and all four of them stumble into one another as they try to get through.

The living room is empty. The hallway is empty. Mike leads the way, tripping over an abandoned towel on the floor -briefly, Nancy thinks she sees blood smeared on it- and rushing into Will's room.

Jonathan's on guard at the door, but he doesn't say a word as the kids move past him. He looks over at her with red eyes and a tight mouth, arms crossed close around his chest.

There's a boy wrapped up under the covers, and Mrs. Byers is rubbing at his hands and whispering soft words to him, but it can't be *Will*.

Because she saw him just last week, whole and healthy and eating cookies in her kitchen.

The boy in the bed is so pale he's nearly translucent, with his hair stuck to his forehead and his thin limbs propped on the blankets at a weird angle. He looks like he's been sick for months, not like all of

this could have happened in just a day.

The boys rush to the side of the bed, pushing each other out of the way to get closer. Mrs. Byers barely seems to notice, but Jonathan moves forward as they begin to grab at Will's arm, try to shake him awake.

"No, hey-" He pulls at Lucas' shoulder, bending over the side of the bed. "You have to be careful."

Painfully, she's reminded of the hospital. They were supposed to be all better now. They were supposed to have gone through the worst of it by *then*.

Will lets out a slow breath. The room seems to freeze in the instant it takes for him to draw in another one, before Jonathan steps away from the bed.

He comes back to her, lingering in the doorway. He's wringing his hands in front of him, rubbing his knuckles into his palm.

She takes one between both of hers and holds it tightly. It feels like ice, frozen solid against her.

"What happened?"

Jonathan looks like he's been crying for hours, like he's only just now taking a moment to remember to breathe.

The light in the hallway keeps flickering, on and off, and there's that feeling prickling the back of her neck again.

Jonathan turns away from the room. He slides his hand firmly into hers and tugs her down the hall. The bathroom door's been left open, and the light in there is rapidly going off too, faster and faster as he pulls her in after him.

There's something in the bathtub.

Something moving, slowly, along the bottom. Thick and dark and slimy, like a disgustingly overgrown slug.

What is it comes into her head, but deep inside of her, she thinks she already knows.

“Where’d it come from?” She asks, and Jonathan tightens his grip on her hand.

His voice is soft and careful when he responds, as if he’s afraid of saying it too loud.

“Will.”

It’s not just slime trailing along the tub she realizes; there’s streaks of dark red, dotting the white of the tub like candy stripes.

Nancy feels sick to her stomach.

She has to shake off his hand, vice grip tight around her, and reach into the back of her jeans.

She can’t shoot into a porcelain tub, best case scenario she cracks it right down the middle and worst case it comes right back at them.

The barrel bites into her fingers at the end as she grips it, spinning in her hand in a move that reminds her of Steve, flash and pomp and action movie-

The butt slams into gooey flesh and the thing stops moving. It ekes red along its back, dripping onto the tub as she pulls away.

Jonathan takes her hand again, or at least she thinks that’s what he’s doing until the gun slips from her fingers and she hears the sound of running water.

He presses it back into her palm, wet against her skin. His fingers stay pressed against hers, not gripping but just *contact*.

The lights keep flickering.

Will's still asleep hours later. The rest of them can't seem to find the same escape. Mike and the boys sit at his bedside, heads propped in their hands, waiting for something they're not even sure of.

Mrs. Byers hasn't moved. She's got Will's hand in her left and a cigarette in her right, still murmuring that he's going to be alright, they'll get through this.

Mike won't leave.

"He's my *friend*." He keeps saying as he and the others form a circle around the bed, warding off whatever might be lurking in the shadows.

Mrs. Byers isn't in a state to make any decisions tonight. Her forehead is permanently creased and her hands shake as she holds Will's head. So it's Jonathan who doles out blankets and glasses of water, like this is a normal slumber party.

She half expects him to say *Don't stay up too late* as he slips out of Will's room.

Nancy places the gun on his nightstand. It rests gently on the wooden table top, and Jonathan regards it with the same wet eyes he's held all night.

"Oh." He says, in lieu of anything else.

There's whispering in the other room, carrying down the hall, but it's nothing new. If something had changed, she's sure someone would be shouting, at the very least.

Jonathan folds back the comforter without saying anything else. He climbs in, jeans and all, and peers up at her through squinted eyes.

“I should-“ *Sleep on the couch, or the floor, or with Mike.*

“Nancy.” It’s a question. It’s an offer.

She pulls down the other side of the blanket. He had slept on top in her room, that night. He’d slept above her covers like shy boys who weren’t your boyfriend were supposed to do.

All of the nights her brain wandered to the thought of sleeping beside Jonathan, and this was definitively not one of the scenarios.

His hand is still cold as she brushes it with her own. It feels like he’ll be half-frozen forever.

The blankets settle down around her, over the sweater she’s just now remembering she’s wearing. Yet it’s comfortable, to lay beside Jonathan and hear his shuddered breathing, feel his hand pressed against the back of hers.

It’s silent in the room down the hall. She wonders if the boys will find sleep, or keep a vigil all night beside Mrs. Byers.

Jonathan turns to his side, and even in the dark of the room she can see the red in his eyes, the pain and guilt and fear written all over his face.

She thinks of how she comforted Mike all those nights, wrapping her body around his and holding him close. They never spoke about it, but she knows how much body contact eased the both of them. So she reaches out with a single hand and rests it against his cheek.

Jonathan squeezes his lips together like he’s in pain, but he doesn’t move to escape her touch.

She’s not sure what to say. Anything about how *it’ll all be okay* would be a lie, or an empty promise, or worse. He’s seen the same things she has, and he’s not quite as blinded by love as his mother.

She doesn’t need to say anything at all, it turns out. For a few long moments they lay there in the quiet, laid empty and open and bare before each other. They inch closer as sleep begins to fall, and Nancy feels her head press against his chest just before she succumbs.

She dreams of being 14. She's been forced into a silly elf costume, pointy ears and all, parading around their basement at the behest of her brother.

It's more fun than she'd like to admit, especially to anyone at school. They've gone all out on the costumes, digging up wigs and old dresses from Mom's storage. Dustin fashioned her a hat and she tucks it over the cardboard ears.

There's a growing noise outside, a growling sort of sound, but no one seems to notice it. The boys roll their dice and romp around the room and in the end she helps Lucas save the princess.

The sound gets louder and louder, but they still don't say anything. Mike goes to the kitchen for pizza, and time seems to pass but no one misses him.

Lucas is next, darting upstairs to use the bathroom. She can't stop the sound bouncing around her head, sending shivers down her spine.

Then Dustin announces he's going to get cookies, and he's gone without even moving at all.

Nancy's all alone with Will, who sits silently at the table and stares down at the board. He's not in a costume, and he looks a ghostly white, sitting perfectly still and unmoving.

The growling is deafening now. She can't hear anything else. It splits her ears and makes her grip her head. She tries to shout at Will but nothing can be heard over the noise, the thing is in her basement, breathing down her neck and screaming in her ears-

She wakes up with a jolt some time later to an empty bed and louder voices down the hall. Nancy waits, thirty seconds seconds, a minute,

in case Jonathan's just in the bathroom.

But the voices get louder, and she slips from his bedroom and creeps towards Will's. The door's open as they left it, and there are three sleeping forms on the floor.

Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are leaning over Will, trading increasingly loud whispers. She catches a few scattered words, like *coughing* and *fever*. They look exhausted, but there's something different in their expressions that certainly wasn't there just a few hours ago.

Jonathan glances up to see her lurking in the doorway. He smiles, just a flash across his face, before he looks back down at Will's hand under his own.

Nancy feels a bit like an intruder. She debates returning to his room, but Jonathan gives his mom a kiss on the forehead before he makes his way over to her.

"Mom says he woke up." He rubs at his eyes. "He was talking a little bit."

"That's good." Her voice is raspy and quieter than she intended, the effect of a much needed rest.

She wonders if he got any sleep. His hair is sticking up again, like he was turning about beside her.

It's so odd, the mix of intimacy and severity in the moment. She just woke up in a boy's bed, but she's only here because his brother might be dying. She held his hand and kissed him, once, things she's thought about for too many nights before going to sleep, but she also brought over a gun and spent a good ten minutes studying the creature living in his bathtub.

He heads out of Will's room and down the hall, and she drifts behind. It's still early morning, maybe five or six. The rest of the house seems so still and quiet, she nearly does a double take as they enter the kitchen and there's another person lingering inside.

If Jonathan is surprised Chief Hopper is here, he does a good job of hiding it. The two don't say anything to each other, as Jonathan darts

around him and gets a glass from the cabinet. Hopper, somehow, seems right at home here, popping two slices of bread into the toaster and sucking down a cup of coffee.

He balances the cup of coffee with a cigarette in one hand, and regards her with a flat expression.

“Breakfast?”

Will wakes again around noon. He sits up and drinks some water this time, and mumbles a bit to his mom before he slips under again. The boys all seem to let out a collective sigh of relief upon seeing this. They look like they’re operating as a single being, all crowded around his bed, all willing for him to be alright.

Nancy calls her mother shortly after. She can’t explain much, but she confirms that she and Mike are fine, and they ought to stay here to help look after Will.

“Shouldn’t he be at a hospital?” Mom asks, and Nancy’s really not sure of the answer. *Probably, yeah.* But she’s fairly certain there’s no kind of doctor who could handle whatever this is.

Night-time comes again, and everyone is still here. The boys haven’t changed, wearing the same crumpled clothes they drove over in. Hopper spilled coffee on her shirt so Jonathan gave her one of his, and it’s loose and wrinkled but it smells the same way her bed did after he spent the night.

Nancy sits beside Mike on floor next to Will’s bed, knees drawn up to her chest like she’s a kid. There isn’t much to say, but Lucas and Dustin pass the time discussing Will’s drawings on the walls. They talk about Will the Wise and Nancy tries to pretend she can’t see Mrs. Byers wiping at her eyes.

Mike tucks into himself as he falls asleep, laying down on a stack of blankets. Nancy brushes the hair off his forehead and feels a respect, a *love*, for her brother like never before creeping up inside of her.

“He’s gonna get better.” Lucas whispers to no one in particular. “I can *tell* he’s gonna get better.”

It’s a long, slow process. It’s a week before he even gets out of bed. Nancy and Mike are sent home on day three, finally. Hopper assures Mike he’ll call if anything changes.

Waiting is the worst. She and Mike both mope around the house, trying to act even remotely interested in anything that isn’t staring at the phone waiting for news. Mom and Dad aren’t sure how to deal with them, so they’re mostly given a wide birth. No regulations, no rules.

One afternoon, Nancy drives out to the woods. She sets up Pepsi cans on a fallen tree and stands fifteen feet away. It’s as easy as ready, aim, fire.

One... two... three.

Weeks go by. The boys meet every day but there’s nothing new to discuss. Just the same hope, repeated over and over to one another.

We’ll see him soon.

Soon occurs one hot day in September, just before school’s set to start. Nancy’s phone rings early in the morning, right after Mom calls her down for breakfast.

She feels who it is, deep in her gut. But she can’t let herself really believe it, until she answers and a gravelly voice mumbles back.

“Nancy?”

It's been nearly a month. She's thought of Will every day. She's thought of the way Jonathan looked that night, the way he held onto his brother, how lost he seemed. She's thought of the way her own brother stared down at that bed with wet eyes.

Selfishly, she's also thought of how it felt to kiss Jonathan, to hold his hand and fall asleep touching him.

“You- You guys can come over.” His voice cracks on the last word. “Will's doing okay.”

Okay. Okay. Okay.

Nancy might break a few speed limits as she heads to their house. It's like a repeat of their last visit, the boys trampling over one another to rush into the house.

They all head for Will's room, and the anxiety is practically palpable in the air. She can feel her own hands tremble against her legs, so she reaches back to grip the handle of the gun.

Will's sat in the bed as they enter, scribbling on something. He looks up and his whole face just lights up, a grin spreading ear to ear.

The boys flock to him, and they're all talking loudly and shouting over each other. Will can't seem to do much shouting, but he laughs and grins like he'll never get tired of it. Mrs. Byers, still hovering beside him, looks a hundred times better than last time. She smiles in tune with Will, her hand reaching out every now and then to touch him, to reassure herself.

Someone bumps her hand.

Jonathan looks improved as well. His eyes are clear and he even smiles himself, his mouth poking up at he looks at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey.”

Nancy bumps him back, their hands brushing for not nearly long enough.

“Hey.” She repeats.

He nods towards the hallway, and she’s ready to follow.

Jonathan shuts the door to his bedroom with a click. She thinks of the only two times she’s been in here before, and how drastically different they’ve both been. Maybe they’ll never hit a normal between the two of them.

“How are you?” It’s such a stupid question, but it’s all she can do to fill the space.

Jonathan shrugs.

“I don’t know.” He says, and it’s the most honest answer he could have given.

“Me either.”

He sucks in a deep breath. He’s leaning back against the door, hands shoved in his pockets. Nancy can barely see the boy she avoided at school, the one who would come pick up his brother without a word to her. As much as she knows that she’s someone else entirely from the girl who drove to Steve’s party last fall, she’s certain Jonathan has changed just as much.

“I missed you.” He’s looking pointedly at the ground, but his voice is soft. “I dreamed about you.”

Something inside of her feels like it’s sliding into place.

“Me too.” Nancy stands, and he slowly raises his gaze. “Good or bad?”

A smile spreads across his face, like he’s remembering the punchline to a joke.

“Both.”

She dreams some nights, when it's cold and dark in her mind, of a place that's flipped backwards. And no matter how hard she tries, she can't escape it. No hole in a tree, no one pulling her out. There's footsteps somewhere off in the distance, but the jolt in her stomach knows they aren't a good sign.

She wakes up from those dreams with a name on her lips- his, or Barb's, or Mike's, or her mom's or Holly's or Steve's or anyone she's ever crossed paths with at all.

She dreams of driving off with Jonathan, not into the sunset but far away from Hawkins and the suburban bullshit and the monster threats and everything terrible that ever happened to them here.

She dreams of Will's coughing, a pale boy in a small bed, a family worried sick.

That one feels terrifyingly real.

She dreams of the monster and long gone friends and a brother who's finally recovering, of her old boyfriend and someone who might one day very soon be her new one, of her mom and dad and a girl with mysterious powers and an old birthday dress, who looks her dead in the eye and smiles, just slightly.

Nancy keeps dreaming.

Notes for the Chapter:

It took way too long, but this is finally over! At last.
A girl rests.